

Sexuality and Female Friendship in Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

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Maryse Condé's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem offers a complex vision of what it means to be Caribbean at a particular moment in the history of colonization. Simultaneously the novel raises social issues, such as racism and religious bigotry, which are not limited to the era in which it unfolds. But it also destabilizes conventional, rigid notions of female heterosexuality, characterized in clearly heterosexual terms, and those of sexually ambivalent intimate female friendships. By rendering the boundaries between heterosexuality, lesbianism, and bisexuality more fluid and tenuous, the novel illuminates the tension between culturally normalized expectations of female sexuality and the realities of women's lives, and presents a means of avoiding the difficulties encountered when feminism is equated with a particular sexual orientation.

KEY WORDS: lesbian identity; female sexuality; romantic female friendship; Maryse Condé; *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*.

Maryse Condé's (1986/1992) novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* is a complex postmodern text that recuperates a lost past through the exploration of the silences, exclusions, and distortions of the colonizing process, examines what it means to be Caribbean within a history of slavery and domination, and attacks the hypocrisy, racism, and religious bigotry (particularly anti-Semitism) of Puritan New England with inevitable implications particularly for contemporary American society. It is also a text that deals with misogyny, gender relations, female sexuality, and feminism. It is these latter aspects of the novel that I wish to address here, and to suggest that the interactions of the exigencies of gender and those of a specific sociohistorical environment result in more than the manifest content of the text acknowledges.

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In the foreword to the English translation of the novel, Angela Davis suggests that “in a sense [Tituba’s] voice can be viewed as the voice of a suppressed black feminist tradition” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. x). In a following paragraph she elaborates:

Tituba is a powerfully sexual being. She accepts and embraces her sexuality and does not allow the strong sexual attraction she feels for men to dilute her active solidarity with women, black as well as white. Yet, because of her defense of her sexuality, she is reluctant to call herself a feminist. From our contemporary vantage point, feminists of all cultures may find enlightenment in her ambivalence (Condé, 1986/1992, p. x).

Davis’s statements indirectly refer to criticism leveled by black feminist thinkers, such as bell hooks (1984, pp. 23, 25), against mainstream white feminism for often taking a man-hating and separatist position in which relations with men become incompatible with being a feminist. These options, or rather the lack of them, place women, and especially women of colour, in the intolerable position of having to choose between commitments to communities that work against sexism and those that resist racism. Davis’s position also reflects the culturally accepted, even if mistaken, notion that equates feminism with a particular sexual orientation, in this case a lesbian one. I would suggest, however, that ambivalence in the novel encompasses not only the relation to feminism, but also, and more importantly, female sexuality. After closely examining the modalities and consequences of such ambivalence, I would propose that, in the final analysis, the novel provides a denunciation of the conditions of male/female relations without resorting to rigid either/or paradigms in which sexual orientation defines or is incompatible with feminism. To do so, however, it puts into question and into play the nature of female sexuality.

Tituba is born of the rape of her mother Abena by an English sailor on a slave ship. When she is seven, her mother is hanged for attacking the master who tried to rape her, and Yao, her adoptive father, kills himself in grief. Tituba is taken in by Mama Yaya, an old African woman who teaches her the healing arts through close and respectful connections with the natural world and communication with spirits—teaches her, in short, to be a “witch.” When Tituba is fourteen, Mama Yaya dies and Tituba becomes a quasi-reclusive healer.

Her life changes when a man enters her life, and she desires him. The description of their relationship presents from the beginning a problematic image of gender relations and female sexuality. John Indian—the jovial, loving, tender, and uninhibited man with whom she falls in love—is, however, also a braggart, a coward, and an opportunist. When Tituba calls on Mama Yaya to help her win Indian’s love, Mama Yaya warns her that “‘Men do not love. They possess. They subjugate’” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 14) and notes that Indian is a womanizer. Her mother tells her that Indian degrades her (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 25). None of this deters Tituba, not even her mother’s lamentations expressed through the rhetorical question, “Why can’t women do without men?” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 15).

By nature of its rhetoricity, this rhetorical question, frequently repeated in the novel, expresses regret at the truth of the assumption that it only purportedly questions—the assumption that women are destined for men, for heterosexuality, regardless of the man's disposition or character. Further details accentuate the disturbing nature of the heterosexual desire thus universalized. The woman is uncontrollably and, in spite of herself, "passive and adoring" and "sick with love" (Condé, 1986/1992, pp. 18, 19). For her lover's sake, Tituba is willing to give up good sense and honor; she will return to life among whites and become a slave. By her own admission, she does all this for John Indian's "main asset," his penis, and becomes not only a slave but metaphorically *his* slave (Condé, 1986/1992, pp. 19, 25). So if female sexuality is unqualifiedly defined as heterosexual, then love and sexuality are closely tied to subjection. Tituba does not even find her own body beautiful until John Indian "sanctifies" it by his interest. She generalizes this phenomenon to a universal truth in the statement: "What is more beautiful than a woman's body! Especially when it is glorified by man's desire!" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 43).

Most troubling, however, is the link established between rape and sexuality. In the second sentence of the novel, Tituba describes her mother's rape as "this act of aggression . . . of hatred and contempt" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 3). Yet when she is moaning with pleasure at the moment of masturbatory orgasm induced by fantasies of John Indian, she wonders, "Was that how my mother had moaned in spite of herself when the sailor had raped her? I understood then why she had wanted to spare her body the second humiliation of a loveless possession and had tried to kill Darnell" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 15). Possession seems to automatically equal pleasure, the implication being that the penis' power to give pleasure is so overwhelming that even violent penetration elicits an orgasmic response in a woman. Paradoxically, rape is condemned yet associated with enjoyment.

By naturalizing a subservient and dependent female heterosexuality, the text would seem to join a cluster of forces that operate to enforce heterosexuality on the level of culture and ideology. It seems an embodiment of and apology for what Adrienne Rich (1986), in her well-known essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," calls heterosexism, that is, "an ideology that demands heterosexuality" and in which sex and violence are presented as congruent (Rich, 1986, p. 43). Tituba's actions and musings reflect sexist role patterning in which femininity is defined as willingness to be a heterosexual sex object (hooks, 1984, p. 150). Her relationship with Indian reflects what Rich and others have called the romantic layer of "the lie of compulsory female heterosexuality," which "asserts that women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically drawn to men" (Rich, 1986, pp. 63, 64). Within that frame, it matters little that Tituba's sexuality does not prevent solidarity with women, since that sexuality, to the extent that it occupies a sexist site, betrays women. Indeed, it could be said that Tituba's heterosexuality does not prevent active solidarity with women only if this solidarity does not interfere with

the satisfaction of her desire—she does not hesitate to sleep with the leader of the maroons even when she knows that this will hurt his concubines.

But if the text seems to operate resolutely from “a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity” (Rich, 1986, p. 24), at the same time it subtly undercuts and resists that position by making visible what Rich (1986) designates as another aspect of the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality: the “rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentally into view from time to time only to become submerged again” (p. 50). This “continent” first appears briefly when sleeping together is presented as one of the characteristics of Abena’s friendship with her master’s wife. It appears again when Tituba forms a bond with Elizabeth Parris, the wife of Indian’s new master in Boston. The description of that bond hovers among friendship, mother/daughter relations, and something more intimate. From their first meeting, Tituba is drawn to Elizabeth and wants to take care of her and heal her of her illnesses and sufferings. Their initial verbal exchange can be read as a parody of a discourse of exoticism: Elizabeth has Tituba sit next to her and murmurs, “‘How lovely you are Tituba’” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 38). She then takes her hands, saying that they are “as soft as cut flowers” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 39). When Tituba asks rather severely whether she has ever seen black flowers, Elizabeth answers: “No, but if they existed they would be like your hands” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 39). The scene is unquestionably exotic, but also curiously reminiscent of the dynamics of seduction scenes. The physical intimacy between the two women is figuratively emphasized by the blood drawn by Parris when he slaps them both for some infraction of Puritan law. It is re-emphasized in Tituba’s combing of Elizabeth’s long blond hair and the massaging of her skin with oils coupled with endearments such as “my poor sweet Elizabeth . . . my tormented lamb” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 45). But even if there are clearly sexual overtones to the friendship, there is nothing *explicitly* lesbian about it. Moreover, pains are taken intermittently to repeat Tituba’s “panting desire” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 66) for her husband almost as if the extravagance of this description negated any chance that there could be another desire at play.

When Tituba is accused of witchcraft, Elizabeth abandons her. In spite of her betrayal, when Tituba is sent to jail, she again falls “into the trap of making friends” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 95). This friendship is a crucial one for at least two reasons. Tituba’s friend is Hester Prynne, the fictional heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1960) *Scarlet Letter*; and when she appears in the narrative, feminism is mentioned for the first time by name in the novel. The inclusion of such a character within the narrative subverts the novel’s historical verisimilitude and reality effect. It forces the reader to suspend the suspension of disbelief common in the reading of fiction and thus to attend to the way the novel engages issues not confined to the historical time during which the action takes place. At the same time, however, since the status of the narrative enters a realm twice removed from reality, both the feminist discourse and the friendship itself are put into question

as realistic, serious, and viable options. The text wants to have it both ways—to suggest the quixotic nature of a close friendship between a black slave and an educated white woman, and, simultaneously, to envision that kind of friendship, with all its attendant characteristics, as a possibility.

But what exactly is both made possible and placed into question? In many ways, the encounter with Hester echoes the one with Elizabeth, although the former treats Tituba as an equal, refusing to be called “mistress.” Both relationships begin with words of admiration and with physical contact. But the erotic overtones of the second are more pronounced, and the physical and verbal intimacy between the women is considerably stronger. For example, when Tituba asks Hester a question the latter does not answer, but takes her face between her hands and says: “You cannot have done evil, Tituba! I am sure of that, you’re too lovely!” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 96). In return, Tituba caresses Hester’s face and whispers: “You too, Hester, are lovely!” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 96). Although still not explicitly sexual the scene presents a mutual attraction that is verbally and physically expressed by both women.

Later Tituba describes the following scene: “Resting my head against this soft curve of flesh, this hummock of life, so that the little one [Hester’s unborn child] inside could be near my lips, I started to tell a tale” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 98). At this moment the oscillation between heterosexual and implicitly lesbian positions is the most apparent and acute. The physical intimacy indicates not only the attraction and ease between two women, but also presents communication between generations of women—an intermingling on levels that suggest a dissolution of conventional boundaries. Yet the sad tale that Tituba tells while resting her head in an unquestionably intimate position is set in the framework of the refrain, “Oh God, why can’t women do without men?” It is as if the taboo on lesbianism is so strong that the content of Tituba’s discourse must deny the reality of her relations with women and generationally transmit a message of a heterosexual destiny. Indeed when Hester describes, in oversimplified parodic terms, a vision of an ideal separatist feminist society where, among other things, children would be raised exclusively by women, Tituba “pokes fun” and teasingly insists that in making those children, unlike Hester, she would like to take her time (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 101). Hester’s response to this clear heterosexual preference is both physical and verbal. She draws Tituba close and says: “You’re too fond of love, Tituba! I’ll never make a feminist out of you!” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 101). When Tituba asks what a feminist is, Hester hugs her and showers her with kisses and then says, “Be quiet! I’ll explain later” (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 101). The conjunction of words and actions reveals several unstated possibilities. Because Hester claims that she will never make a feminist of Tituba after the latter reiterates her sexual preference for men, the inference is that heterosexuality is incompatible with feminism. By implication, feminism then entails not only separatism, but also a lesbian sexual orientation. Yet Hester’s actions seem to belie the categorical conclusion that she

will never make a feminist out of Tituba. After all, hugs and kisses, coupled with the injunction to be quiet, are the conventional preludes to further physical intimacy. In short, the dynamics between the two women hint that Tituba's much insisted-upon heterosexuality perhaps is not definitive or unassailable.

Up to this point, the text renders visible the *invisibility* of lesbian possibilities. And the more obvious the intimations of such possibilities, the less realistic weight they possess on the narrative level. After Hester's suicide and before Tituba goes to her new master, the Jewish merchant Benjamin Cohen d'Azenedo, the issue of lesbian sexual relations actually materializes and is visible for a brief time, even if on one more level removed from reality. On the eve of her liberation from prison, Tituba recounts a ghostly visitation from Hester:

That night Hester lay down beside me, as she did sometimes. I laid my head on the quiet water lily of her cheek and held her tight. Surprisingly, a feeling of pleasure slowly flooded over me. Can you feel pleasure from hugging a body similar to your own? For me, pleasure had always been in the shape of another body whose hollows fitted my curves and whose swellings nestled in the tender flatlands of my flesh. Was Hester showing me another kind of pleasure? (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 122).

For the first time, an alternative to heterosexuality is overtly suggested, although it is not explicitly named. What the text has been intermittently, subtly, and allusively hinting at, surfaces for a moment and then is immediately submerged, leaving no trace except for, sometime later, the "fleeting presence" on Tituba's neck of a pair of ghostly lips belonging to Hester (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 125).

The nonrealistic space of a sexual experience with a woman whose existence, even when alive, was fictional once removed, signals the text's resistance to or uneasiness with the choice it is proposing. In addition, as if to erase the impact or obliterate the scandal of having Tituba even entertain the notion of an other sexuality, the text returns to heterosexuality with a vengeance. It is claimed that any relationship between a man and a woman, with even the least hint of affection, must end up in bed. In spite of Benjamin's twisted and unattractive body, Tituba responds to his kindness and eventual passion, and becomes not only his slave but his satisfied lover. When he refuses to grant her freedom, she settles into the ways of his Jewish family and begins to "divide the world into two groups: the friends of Jews and the others" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 128). When he finally frees her and books her passage back to Barbados, she begs him to leave her chains and adds: "Hester, Hester, you would be angry with me. But some men who have the virtue of being weak instill in us the desire to be a slave!" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 140). John Indian's attractiveness and Benjamin's love and neediness elicit the same reactions from a compassionate and loving Tituba, reactions that are consistent with the traditional notions of total abnegation of self as a sign of a woman's love. Soon after arriving back in Barbados, Tituba begins sleeping with the leader of the maroons and does not leave him until his lack of respect for her turns to utter contempt. She is reproached by Mama Yaya and Abena for her inability to do without men, but this does not stop her from, in a certain sense, even defying the

incest taboo by acquiescing in blissful contentment to the sexual desire of Iphigene, a boy she considers her son. Sex is bliss and a blissful subservience.

According to a speculative scenario recounted by Adrienne Rich, Tituba's last sexual encounter could serve as the quintessential story of the initiation of patriarchy, whereby adolescent males, originally excluded from bands of females and children, enable men to overrun such groups eventually by manipulating maternal affection to establish male right of sexual access (Rich, 1986, p. 49).² Rich finds this hypothesis suggestive of one form of social ideology that benefits compulsory heterosexuality—"the maintenance of a mother-son relationship between women and men, including the demand that women provide maternal solace, nonjudgmental nurturing, and compassion" (Rich, 1986, p. 49) for all men, even those who actively or passively abuse them or otherwise take advantage of them. This is most clearly depicted in Tituba's relationship with Benjamin Cohen. She responds with compassion and care to his passion and love for her. He in turn treats her as part of his family. Besides sleeping with him, she fulfills all the duties of a servant; she takes care of the children, cooks, cleans, and performs countless other domestic chores. But although he does not actively abuse her, he does take advantage of all that she can offer, while refusing to grant her legal freedom from slavery.

The night before Tituba dies because of a betrayed slave revolt, and after she and Iphigene make love, she wonders for the first time about her behavior with men; she wonders "whether this [loving men too much] was not a blemish in me, a fault that I should have tried to cure myself of" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 170). The context of the entire novel makes clear that this questioning has nothing to do with Christian notions of morality, but it is rather a questioning of the nature and objects of her loving. Her response comes from beyond the grave, when she expresses regret at being separated from Hester, but adds:

I know that she [Hester] is pursuing her dreams of creating a world of women that will be more just and humane. I myself have loved men too much and shall continue to do so. Sometimes I get the urge to slip into someone's bed to satisfy a bit of leftover desire and my fleeting lover is delighted with his solitary pleasure (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 178).

It would seem that the text retains a staunchly heterosexual/heterosexist position and that the incompatibility between a separatist feminism and being interested in men remains in place. On a certain level, such a conclusion is inevitable. I would claim, however, that it ignores the function and significance of the instances when woman-to-woman bonding is foregrounded, and thus it does not take into account the instability with which the very presence of these instances imbue the text's positions. Ultimately these positions remain unsettled because dualistic either/or positions are circumvented; ambivalence becomes undecidability, a movement of

²The scenario referred to is Rich's summary of chapter 6 of Susan Cavin's doctoral dissertation (Rutgers University, 1978), later published as *Lesbian Origins* (San Francisco: Ism Press, 1986), in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," p. 49 and n. 42.

continuing interrogation and expansion of possibilities. Through the examples of female friendship depicted in the novel, what Rich (1986) defines as the “lesbian continuum” (problematic as the concept may be) is, very tentatively, proposed. According to Rich, the lesbian continuum “has run like a continuous theme through the heterosexual experience” and encompasses all possible forms of bonding and primary intensity between and among women including, but not limited to or necessitating, genital sexual experience between women; it also acknowledges the erotic element in female friendship and thus broadens and deepens the range of what is defined as erotic (pp. 23, 51, 53, 54). In other words, existing on the lesbian continuum is not incompatible with heterosexuality, but it does subvert and undermine the latter’s status as the inevitable and sole site of erotic and emotional satisfaction for women.

But why is this continuum presented in such a tentative fashion? Recourse to a particular socio-historical context would perhaps illuminate the difficulties of directly presenting the instability of Tituba’s (sexual) identity. Lillian Faderman (1989), who engages the historical constitution of various forms of lesbianism, asserts that before the twentieth century, in America and many parts of Europe, serious and passionate romantic friendships existed between women, which more often than not exclude genital relations, but in every other way were emotionally intense love relationships. Because society believed that women had little sexual passion and women often internalized this belief, they could “kiss, fondle each other, sleep together,” and even become sexually aroused while denying the sexual component of their relations (Faderman, 1989, p. 26). Moreover, even if their relationships included sexual contact, these were condoned by society as long as they did not violate men’s rights to female bodies. Indeed, according to Faderman, lesbianism in the first modern definitions given it by sexologists at the beginning of the century did not have to include a sexual component and thus was not very different from romantic friendship. But with the advent of the increasing independence of women, which coincided with a more realistic view of the female sex drive, with the realization that women were capable of sexual expression and enjoyment and had a right to the pleasures these entailed, came a change in society’s attitude towards lesbian relationships. Along with the changes and women’s independence came the result that lesbianism was condemned as deviant, perverse, and abnormal either morally or emotionally, not simply because sexuality was involved but also because being linked to women’s emerging freedom, it threatened heterosexuality and its attendant patriarchal culture of male dominance and female subservience (Faderman, 1989, p. 28).

Condé’s text does not fit Faderman’s historical schema exactly, because it functions in an other than American or European context. But that schema helps to illuminate the possible reasons for the contradictory elements in the characterization of Tituba. On the one hand, a contrast is set up between a constricting Puritan morality and the exuberant and vibrant sexuality of the African descendants of the Caribbean islands, particularly as represented by Tituba. On the other, Condé uses

the language of romantic friendship, which in no way differs from the language of heterosexual love, to describe Tituba's relationships with women, and she emphasizes all that is lovely, natural, and nurturing in such relationships. In keeping with the romantic friendship paradigm, Tituba seems oblivious to or unconscious of the sexual undercurrents in her friendships with women, and heterosexual relations certainly take precedence over same-sex ones. But her sexual naiveté in terms of women is inconsistent with her portrayal as a powerfully (hetero)sexual being. In a novel that is not rigidly bound or settled within the limits of the historical era it depicts, that inconsistency points to the possibility that the features of romantic friendships are used to conceal the very problematic twentieth-century attitude toward lesbianism or bisexuality that Faderman describes.

As Faderman points out, in an ideal world where men do not claim supremacy, do not dictate to a woman who and how she is to be, or try to indoctrinate her with the "notion that to be normal she must transfer the early love she felt for her mother first to her father and then to a father substitute" (Faderman, 1989, p. 30), neither women nor men would choose love objects according to gender, and "potential or actual bisexuality . . . would be normal, both emotionally and statistically" (Faderman, 1989, p. 31). Condé's novel, however, presents a world that, although set in the past, reflects the conditions of a modern world. Tituba is a woman whose strength and independence are evident, although they are always subsumed to men's desires, preventing her, even if with her willing acquiescence, from developing her identity as an individual human being. Even Iphigene, as she admits after the two had agreed on the need for a revolt, "no longer consulted me on anything" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 161). It is only after her death that her full radical potential is realized, with the help, not dominance, of her male companion, and she can say that she is the force behind "every revolt. Every insurrection. Every act of disobedience" (Condé, 1986/1992, p. 175) on the part of the oppressed island populace. In a world where care is taken to insist in an exaggerated fashion that a woman's self-sufficiency and self-reliance in no way disrupt the primacy of male authority, it is perfectly consistent that same-sex bonding, of whatever kind, be limited to links to ghostly figures or presented in ambiguous language or in insubstantial narrative spaces.

For that very reason, the existence of female friendships, as they are portrayed in the novel, dilute the intensity and exclusivity of heterosexual relations and thereby, at least potentially, attenuate or blunt the heterosexist elements of those relations. They allow for the possibility of separating the bliss of sexual love from slavish subservience. They also sap the strength of the stereotypes that underpin the dichotomy set up between feminism and heterosexuality by relocating the parameters of feminism and sexuality and thus pointing to the falseness of that dichotomy. In other words, within the framework of specifically Caribbean realities, the novel offers a vision of intimacy between women that, while neither denying nor requiring a specific sexual preference, expands the horizons and permutations of all relational possibilities and reconfigures both feminism and female sexuality.

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